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ABSTRACT

This study examined the extent to which new Head Start directors participated in education and training activities to prepare for professional practice. Surveys were mailed to 110 new directors; telephone interviews were conducted with 53 of these directors. Responses indicated that: (1) each director was responsible for an average of 69 staff, 150 children, and a budget of more than $1.5 million; (2) fewer than 10 percent reported being prepared for their job responsibilities; (3) 51 percent of the subjects had not participated in any management training or educational activities; (4) more than 58 percent had earned college degrees in fields unrelated to early childhood education, education administration, or business management; (5) directors wanted training in (and found these topics the most troublesome) administration (83 percent), non-profit law (73 percent), and fiscal management (75 percent); (6) 84 percent of respondents preferred workshops and 69 percent preferred mentoring as delivery vehicles; and (7) for help in preparing for the job, more than 72 percent identified on-the-job training, 18 percent reported professional development, and more than 10 percent reported academic coursework. Overall, directors reported initial self-confidence eroding under the onslaught of overwhelming responsibilities, recognition that responsibilities were greater than education and training received, and feeling overwhelmed by unexpected urgencies of the job. Recommendations based on these findings included: (1) establishing a task force to examine the "real" academic and training needs of directors; and (2) conducting a national study to examine the content of the Administration in Early Childhood Education course. (Contains 87 references.) (DLH)

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New Head Start Directors Perception About Preparedness for Their Job Responsibilities

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Head Start is presumably the most examined social action program in America. Countless studies have been conducted on Head Start since its inception in 1965. The largest body of research has been conducted on the benefits of services offered to children and families. For the most part, these studies conclude that Head Start has a positive impact on participants. Thus, Head Start has come to be regarded as a sound investment, a cost-effective means of reducing school and social failure among children in poverty (Zigler & Styfco, 1994, p.127). However, these benefits are only received when quality services are offered to children and families.

The job responsibilities of Head Start directors have advanced dramatically over the last decade (Lombardi, 1990; Day Care Survey, 1970-1971). Increasingly, these challenges entail management and business responsibilities for which few Directors have no formal in-depth training (Clark, Martire, & Bartolomeo, 1990, p. 5). The fact that directors need more education and management training is substantiated by program reviews that have found Head Start agencies out of compliance in areas related to management and administration.

The Job Responsibilities of Directors

Those in charge of Head Start agencies can be considered program supervisors, administrators, or program directors. Regardless of their professional title they all shoulder the responsibility of directing and managing programs that care for children.

The responsibilities of managing Head Start agencies are complex. The Head Start director is responsible for overseeing the day to day intricate operations of the agency. It is a long-standing belief, bent with age, that the duties of a director are to greet children in the morning, feed them in the afternoon, and send them home in the evening. With this belief also comes the notion that in between the above activities the director can serve as classroom teacher and ancillary support staff. Head Start agencies can no longer afford to staff their programs with directors who serve as teachers, teachers assistants, bookkeepers, and secretaries.

Recruitment Practices for Directors

It is not unusual for child care workers to be hired as directors before completing any formal education or training that would prepare them for their management responsibilities. The general pattern for the preparation of directors seems to be a move up from the position of group teacher (child care worker) on the basis of classroom experience and interest more than on the basis of preparation (Almy, 1981). An individual child care worker can acquire high informal status ... (as director) ... within a specific work context as the result of acuity, sensitivity to the needs of those in care, longevity or adroit presentation or self (Toigo, 1981, p. 247). The three most commonly paths taken to securing a directorship are:

1. Complete required college coursework that leads to a credential ,degree, or certificate and then seek employment in the field;
2. Enter the field in a position that does not require certification and then

through work experience acquire knowledge, skills, and certification and

3. Promote up from the position of classroom staff or program specialist.

Most child care workers are hired ... "off the street" without knowledge and expertise specific to their job responsibilities (Austin, 1981, p.251). Particularly in the inner city, early childhood programs (day care, Head Start, nursery schools, and the like) tend to be staffed by persons who may have substantial practical child-rearing experiences but lack, in varying degrees, the specialized knowledge and skills necessary for the provision of high quality developmental experiences for young children (Brawley, Gerstein, & Watkins, 1981, p.125).

Furthermore, Brawley et al., reported that many of these staff members are drawn from low-income and minority communities and despite their innate ability and high potential, they are not able, for a variety of reasons, to follow the traditional routes for increasing competence and gaining higher credentials. Many of the staff ... "do not have a career discipline with which to identify" (Austin, 1981, p. 253). Furtherance, those child care workers who survive for any length of time are typically persons who do not possess the education to obtain better jobs and their motives for entering child care seem to be vaguely humanitarian (Austin, 1981, p. 251). Current research suggests the need to provide a different kind of academic preparation and training for Head Start directors. Unfortunately, "there is a surprising lack of agreement about what constitutes minimum qualifications and how individuals should be trained" (Bloom-Jorde, 1992; Lombardi, 1990). Garfield (1984) and Kuykendall (1990) discuss the importance of developing a curriculum that incorporates courses that are related to every aspect of a

Head Start (child care) agency. Overall, the literature supports the need to provide directors with appropriate training to help them develop special skills needed to manage quality programs (Amanna, 1993). Many observers have suggested that a curriculum for school administrators, given the nature of the job, should be "issues based" or organized around a set of problems that administrators face on a daily basis (Bartell, 1994.

The purpose of this study was to examine the extent in which new Head Start directors participate in education and training activities to prepare them for professional practice. All information gathered from this study was obtained in two phases. In Phase I a survey was mailed to 110 new Head Start directors across the continental United States. This survey collected demographic data regarding level of educational attainment, length of employment, and gender.

In Phase II telephone interviews were conducted with 53 new Head Start directors, who participated in Phase I. Phase II assessed:

1. the amount and type of academic instruction and training activities completed by new Head Start directors;

2. actual management and administrative job responsibilities,

3. perceptions regarding whether or not directors felt they were prepared to meet their job responsibilities;

4. the level of confidence that new Head Start director's have for meeting their responsibilities; and

5. the type of education and training activities that new directors would like to have to prepare them for their job responsibilities.

Some of the findings uncovered in this study include:

1. Each director was responsible for an average of: 69 staff, 150 children, and a budget of over 1.5 million dollars;

2. Less than 10% of the new Directors, reported being prepared for their job responsibilities;

3. Of the total population 51% had not participated in any management training or educational activities;

4. The majority of the respondents (over 58%) earned a college degree in a subject unrelated to Early Childhood Education, Education Administration, or Business Management;

5. Directors wanted educational and training activities in: personnel administration (83%), non-profit law (73%), and fiscal management (75%). These topics were also reported as the most troublesome areas of their jobs;

6. Of the respondents, 84% preferred a series of workshops and 69% preferred a mentoring relationship. Respondents indicated that they preferred mentoring because it would allow them to partner with a trained and experienced director "with whom they could develop a trusting relationship"; and

7. Of the total respondents over 72% reported that on the job training helped prepare them to meet their job responsibilities; 18% reported that professional development helped to prepare them; and over 10% reported that the academic coursework they completed was helpful.

Some of the recommendations include:

1. Establishing a task force to examine the "real" academic and training needs of directors. This task force could conduct more research on curriculum development for new Head Start directors, how to move states and local governments toward establishing a single set of requirements for directors; how self confidence of directors affects program outcomes; how to change the publics perception on the roles, responsibilities, and professionalism of directors; what leadership styles are most effective in operating a Head Start agency; and the skills directors should possess before they take on a directorship.

2. Conduct a national study to examine the content of the Administration in Early Childhood Education course. Although this course was taken by directors in various locations throughout the United States at different times over their professional careers they all reported that the information contained in this course was not useful in preparing them to meet their management job responsibilities.

All of the respondents reported feeling an initial sense of self confidence for meeting their job responsibilities. However, they reported that their confidence slowly diminished due to the overwhelming responsibilities of the job, and the lack of information, skills and preparedness they had for meeting their responsibilities.

New Head Start directors recognized their responsibilities were greater that the education and training they received. New Head Start directors receive training parallel with Head Start teachers; yet, their responsibilities are incomparable.

Overall, this study found that directors felt overwhelmed by the unexpected urgencies of the jobs. Directors reported initial feelings of self confidence when they

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began their positions. However, they reported that those feelings quickly diminished when they began their responsibilities. The findings describe directors who accept the perception of their responsibilities as easy and manageable although they describe their responsibilities as overwhelming and not easily managed.

The data collected in this study produced research data regarding the academic and training needs of new Head Start directors. Based on the data, new Head Start directors felt that they needed training and education in all areas related to program management. Through this study, I hoped to provide a glimpse of the directors' responsibilities and the need to match educational and training activities with those responsibilities. Recognizing that Head Start and child care are perceived as baby-sitting, I took on the task to document and describe the roles and responsibilities of directors and compare those roles and responsibilities to the training and educational activities that they have completed.

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